Sacred Journey

THE JOURNAL OF FELLOWSHIP IN PRAYER

Winter 2010
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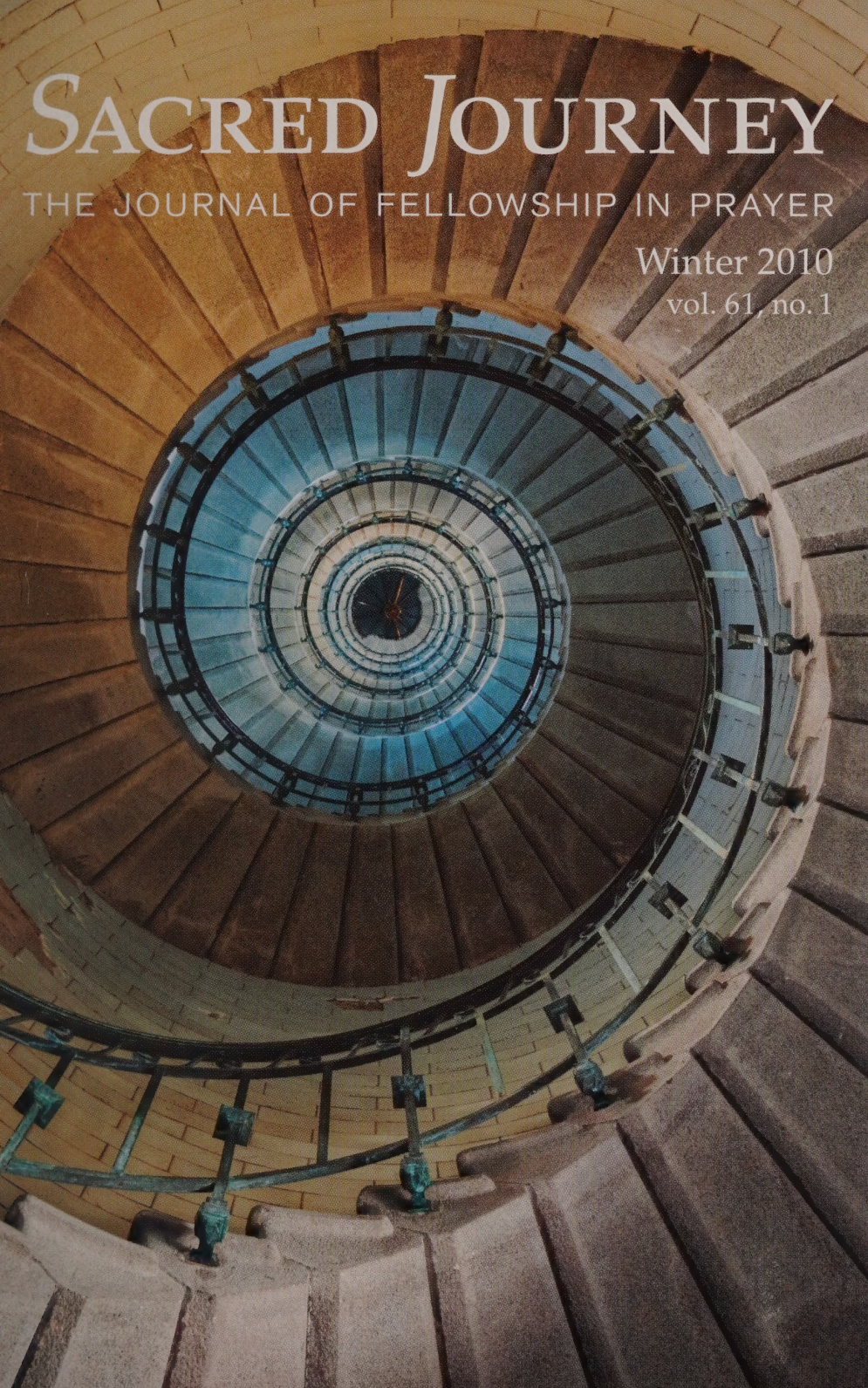

SACRED JOURNEY

THE JOURNAL OF FELLOWSHIP IN PRAYER

Fellowship in Prayer

encourages and supports
a spiritual orientation to life,

promotes the practice
of prayer, meditation,
and service to others,

and helps bring about
a deeper spirit of unity
among humankind.

SACRED JOURNEY

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We welcome submissions of articles on prayer, meditation, spiritual experience and practice, religious faith or similar topics, as well as prayers and poetry. We look for writing that expresses an individual's personal experience while also conveying a deeper message of universal appeal. Writing must be accessible to people of all traditions. Please include a brief biography and full contact information: name, address, phone numbers and email. Articles should not exceed 1500 words and should be submitted to the editor by email: submissions@sacredjourney.org. If necessary, they may be mailed.

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Believe

JANET M. HAAG

One day last week I picked up a mug and noticed the word "Believe" etched on it. Subsequently, I caught sight of a neighbor's door decoration which read "Believe." Then, as I was meandering past a local bookstore, I happened to see a sign in the window which in big, bold print said . . . you guessed it . . ."BELIEVE."

It seems like a simple enough mandate, but—believe in what, in whom? We do, in fact, all believe in something, in someone, just about every minute of every day, from the sublime—G-d, our Buddha nature, Jesus, the goodness of life and love—to the mundane—the firmness of the earth on which we stand, that sleep will come and food will satisfy our hunger. And these beliefs of ours prompt us to act. How we live our lives is based on what we choose to believe.

Several weeks ago I attended a presentation by Mitch Albom (author of the acclaimed book, *Tuesdays with Morrie*, and his more recent best-seller, *Speaking of Faith*). Albom reported a conversation he once had with his rabbi about prayer. He asked the holy man, "Do you pray?" "I do," the rabbi replied. "And what do you say?" "Well, I talk to G-d, I ask him about things." Does he answer?" queried Mitch. "I'm still waiting," responded the rabbi. This is what I mean—the rabbi actively waits on G-d because he believes.

Most often, we go about our day-to-day activities in a pre-reflective manner. That's not a bad thing. Being hyper-alert and aware would most certainly become exhausting, but it seems to me it would be worthwhile on occasion to pause and ask ourselves what exactly we believe about this situation or that person and how our belief is influencing our actions. It can present a moment of real clarity in which we can choose—to re-affirm or challenge what

we believe to be true, and to decide whether we want to continue to do what we are doing or make a change.

Similarly, we ordinarily don't know a lot about what our fellow human beings believe. We watch what they do; we tend to formulate a quick judgment; we react. How different it might be if we were to ask a few questions and really listen to the answers, if we were to stand in their shoes, even for a moment.

I am inclined to think this contemporary call to "Believe" is based on the dawning realization of just how little we know, fed by a world of uncertainties. It is also deeply rooted in hope. When we "believe"—we won't give up; we are willing to stay engaged, to work and to wait. This issue of the journal is an invitation to contemplation and action. It raises the fundamental question, "What is it you believe?" SJ

Janet M. Haag is the Executive Director of Fellowship in Prayer.

An Interview with Joan Chittister

Sr. Joan Chittister has been considered a visionary spiritual voice for more than thirty years. She is a member of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie, Pennsylvania, and founder and Executive Director of BenetVision. She is an internationally renowned speaker and the author of many books. She is also a regular contributor to the National Catholic Reporter. *Sister Joan advocates for peace and social justice around the world. She served on the interfaith council that helped to draft The Charter of Compassion (see page 41) Most recently, Sister Joan was a speaker at the National Parliament of Religions in Melbourne, Australia and the UN Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen. Fellowship in Prayer is delighted that she will be joining us for our 60th Anniversary Conference, Prayer: An Answer for the 21st Century, June 24-27, 2010 at Princeton University. With her incredibly busy schedule, we are particularly grateful she was willing to take the time to speak with us and share some of her reflections on prayer.*

Fellowship in Prayer: How do you define prayer in your life?

Joan Chittister: After more than fifty-five years of growing into a life of prayer through a lifestyle based on it, my definition of prayer is consciousness, immersion, and relationship. Prayer makes us aware of the elements of the divine in human life, bringing us into contact with the God-life in and around us. Prayer is not personal devotion; it is personal growth. Prayer brings us to the ultimate and the eternal, the daily and the regular, the total consciousness of God now. Prayer enables us

to be immersed in what is fundamentally and truly divine in life right now. It is not meant to be a bridge to somewhere else because God is not somewhere else. God is here. Prayer is the act of beginning the process of becoming one with the One we seek—eventually, melting into God completely. This can be accomplished through immersion in the Sacred Scriptures. As Christians, what drives us is not *has* Jesus died but *who* Jesus is and *why* Jesus died. *How* he defines life and death will become our own understanding if we live prayerful lives.

Did you feel this way about prayer from early on in your life or is this something you have slowly developed over time?

Well, there was certainly a time in my very young life, when prayer was an exercise. However I wasn't long in monastic life when I realized, like a teabag, I was being steeped in an environment that spoke to me of another layer and level of life. In this environment the notion that prayer is somehow or other an exercise in words simply dissolved very quickly. You know, in the Catholic tradition, around the 15th or 16th century, the Roman Catholic Church began to talk about prayer in different forms—prayers of adoration, prayers of contrition, prayers of thanksgiving, and prayers of supplication. These are types of formal prayers, based on words, but they are not prayer. Prayer moves us from the level of personal consciousness to God-consciousness, union with God or what we call the mystical life.

The Sufis tell a wonderful story about a seeker who one night hears a voice saying, "Who's there?" and the Sufi seeker answers with great excitement, "It is I, it is I, Lord! I am right here!" And the voice disappears. Years later, the Sufi again hears the voice calling, "Who's there?" The Sufi thinks, "Here's that voice again!" and he gets very excited at yet another opportunity, and responds, "It is I, Lord, and I seek you with all my heart!" Once again, the voice disappears. Some years

later he again hears the voice calling, "Who's there?" This time, the Sufi replies, "Thou Lord, only Thou!" This story clearly describes the process of moving oneself into the mind, heart, and consciousness of God. It comes, yes, little by little, but it also comes instantaneously, once we move into what the ancient mystics call "prayer without words." This prayer is the prayer of consciousness. This prayer is the very breath of life. Consciousness that the breath I breathe is the breath of God is the sum total of an attitude of prayer.

So are you saying if we are sitting in chapel and just consciously breathing, we are praying?

Absolutely, you are. And you may be praying with more prayerfulness than the person who is sitting right next to you reciting words and thinking of nothing but the baseball game that night.

What if more often than not we are distracted?

It happens. Quit trying.

Quit trying—that would be your advice?

Yes!

How is it that you manage to lead a contemplative life with all the demands on your time in our fast-paced world?

For me, leading a contemplative life is being a person who sees the world as God sees the world, it is putting on the mind of God. The Scriptures are clear. "Put on ye the mind of Christ." What does this mean? Begin to think the way Jesus thought. Begin to think about life, about people, about issues, about everyday incidents the way Jesus thought about them. Jesus

tells us over and over again how he thought about them. And he tells the leaders of the synagogue and of the state how he thought about them. Contemplation is an attitude of life. It is not an exercise. Sitting in contemplation, in prayer, is certainly a necessary part of the development of a life of prayer. But it is not the end; it is simply the means. Let me put it this way—some people use contemplative as a synonym for cloistered, a definition I completely reject. Why? If cloister is the essence of contemplation, then we are saying the Jesus who walked from Galilee to Jerusalem, raising the dead and curing the sick, was not contemplative. Are we saying that Jesus was only a contemplative for forty days in his life when he was off in the desert, separated from everyone else? We know the minute we hear this kind of thing it is pure unadulterated nonsense. Yet when we apply being contemplative to our own lives, we sometimes act as if it means we have to be totally removed from the rest of the world. No! Being contemplative means that I live totally immersed in the presence of God with the rest of the world around me. I keep coming back to the word consciousness. There is no substitute for it. Consciousness is the essence of contemplation—consciousness of the presence of God—of the mind of God—of the will of God, and consciousness of God working in and through us.

Do we develop contemplation by practicing it until it eventually becomes a habit?

We do, in essence, practice it. Somehow or another, we have to get beyond the notion that life is divided into moments of going to church, saying our prayers, living in God or living our lives. There used to be a prayer in the back of the Sunday Missal called a "Prayer for a Happy Death." Somewhere along the way when I was about twenty-years old, I found myself saying this prayer, but it didn't have anything to do with death for me. It had to do with living in the sanctity of

the present moment. I think the words of the prayer were, *Lord Jesus, at this moment, I do accept from Thy hands with a quiet and trusting heart, whatsoever death Thou shalt choose to send me, with all its pain and grief.* What this called me to at the age of 20, was the acceptance of every single moment of my life and whatever came to me as being for the sake of my spiritual development. It is what we used to call abandonment to Divine Providence. It meant that doing whatever I was being asked to do now would have something to do with the presence of God in my life. Contemplation is a practice, a practice again of consciousness.

How does your commitment to the rule of St. Benedict influence your prayer?

It is extremely influential in my prayer. Benedictine prayer is based on reading the Scriptures and praying the Psalms three to five times a day, every day. Interestingly enough, St. Benedict says "Let your prayer be short." This surprises most people because generally speaking, we think that a prayerful person is someone who spends all day in church or praying the rosary. Benedict suggests that formal prayer, choral prayer, community prayer should all be brief and what is learned in these moments of prayer is what we should carry with us throughout the rest of the day. Prayer should simply form the basis for reflection and attitude-building throughout our lives. Benedictine prayer is a provocation to reflection and reflection is the basis of contemplation. Contemplation is the foundation of consciousness and consciousness is the beginning of union with God.

In one of your reflections entitled *Contemplation in the Midst of Chaos*, you draw a very clear distinction between religion and spirituality. Would you elaborate on that distinction?

I realize that many people may say there is no distinction, but for me the Christian religion is the organized institutional

expression of the following of Jesus; regulation for the way we go about worship. Spirituality, on the other hand, is the personal expression of that following of Jesus; of living Christian values at every level of our lives. For example, we could go to church every week throughout every year of our entire lives and never develop our own spirituality. We could jump through every religious hoop, and at the end of the day, still not have any real spiritual consciousness. Religion is meant to lead us to a spiritual life. That's why some people say they are both the same. But religion doesn't necessarily lead us to spirituality. We have to do that for ourselves. I am reminded of a story in which a Sufi Master is dying and his disciples say to him, "Oh, do not leave us master, because we won't know what to do." The master looks at his disciples and says, "You must understand that I am only a finger pointing at the moon. When I go, hopefully, you will see the moon." Religion is like that, a finger pointing at the moon.

Are you saying we need both religion and spirituality and one without the other won't work?

Right! We have to have a base for spirituality, a foundation with depth and breadth, conscience and context. It has to help us formulate the spiritual principles on which we will make choices.

Would you share a personal expression of what this means to you?

For me it is a commitment to justice, to making the good of others, the good of the world community the ground on which I make choices. Justice is more than niceness or random acts of kindness. Justice is a principle of life. For example, from a religious perspective in this day and age, I believe justice requires me to have as much respect for Islam, as I do for

Catholicism. We do Islam a great disservice if we judge the entire tradition on the basis of a few radicals. My spirituality directs me to recognize the spiritual foundation, the truth and vision in every religion.

You reveal a genuine openness for different religious traditions, how did this evolve for you?

Well, I think there were several paths to my openness. First, there was my own personal experience. I was a child of a mixed marriage with a Roman Catholic mother and a Presbyterian father, in an era when mixed marriages were frowned on by all religions and the divide between Catholics and Protestants was fueled by prejudice on both sides. Going back to your previous question concerning the difference between spirituality and religion, my experience here is a perfect example. We were a deeply religious family, but our sense of what it meant to be religious did not include Methodists, Presbyterians, Lutherans—any Protestants, for that matter. It was the same for them. Catholics had no monopoly on prejudice. We were all very religious people and we missed the real underlying spiritual message in the very religions we revered. As a child I knew this kind of prejudice was wrong. I knew it intuitively. Both of my parents were good. Both of their families were good. Yet both had been trained to reject the other, to diminish and degrade and even hate the other. There were wars of religion being fought in kitchens all over the world. And it was pathetic. Even as a child, I knew it was pathetic, and I wasn't going to be part of it. In a way though, my parents were also role models because even though both their families and society at large frowned on their marriage, they married each other anyway. They lived in a more evolved state and they were children of their own times. It wasn't easy for them, and there were lapses in their openness. Nonetheless they were already the vanguard for people, witnessing to and modeling a new way of being in the world.

This personal experience was phenomenally important for me. It was difficult but I wouldn't give it up. It made me the person I am today.

A second influence in terms of my openness was the opportunity I had to travel internationally back in the 1970s—this immediately took me out of my parochial ghetto. It became obvious to me that goodness was the essence of all peoples, cultures and traditions of the world. They were all beautiful. There was absolutely no doubt in my mind that God was present in very striking and profound ways in all these different peoples and places.

Finally, literature had a great deal to do with my openness. I read deeply from all of the traditions to which I was exposed. I was astounded by their spiritual messages. They were not messages of hatred. They were not messages of prejudice. The scriptures of all the major religions carry strong messages of beauty, depth and principle, messages about love and the presence of God. It was impossible for me to deny.

Did you share the powerful feelings you had about the religious divisions you encountered as a child?

Oh yes, I shared them with my mother—she was very, very good. I've told this story so often I hesitate to tell it again, but it had a tremendous impact on me so I will tell it once more. I was an only child and my parents and I had an early evening routine in our house. I would get home from school around the same time that my father arrived home from work. The minute I got in, I had to sit down to tell them what I had learned in my classes that day. As a youngster in second grade at the local Catholic school, I was taught, of course, that only Catholics went to heaven. On the day I was first told this, I did not stay to help Sister empty the wastebasket or clean the chalkboard. Instead, I raced home. I needed to get home before my father did because he would ask me what I learned that day. I knew

I didn't want to tell him and it would never have occurred to me to lie. I came in the house breathless. My mother was washing dishes at the sink, if I remember correctly. She said to me, "Well, you are excited, and you're home early. What's going on? Did something happen in school?" I said, "Yes." "What was it?" she asked. I told her, "Sister said that Protestants don't go to heaven." My mother just stood still at the sink for a moment and then she asked, "What do you think about that, Joan?" I was about seven years old at the time, and I replied, "I think Sister is wrong." Now you have to know I was struggling to make sense of this because I loved the nuns. The nuns could not be wrong. I loved every one of them, and as far as I was concerned what Sister said had to be right. After a few minutes I finally replied "Sister is wrong because Sister doesn't know daddy." I felt quite sure that if she had all the information, she never would have made such a mistake. My mother then asked, "What did you say to Sister?" I remember feeling terribly embarrassed and hanging my head because I could not bear to look at my mother. "I didn't say anything." My mother came and put her arms around me, "You are a very smart little girl Joan and I am very proud of you. It's all right! You don't have to say anything to Sister now, you can tell Sister later." This is where I have spent the rest of my life—telling Sister later that she is wrong. I knew at the age of seven I was living with one foot in each world, and I steadfastly refused to move either foot.

What do you think are the most important questions religious leaders should be asking of the world today?

I think religious leaders have to ask themselves some questions before they can ask anything of anyone else. I think that religious leaders, all of us, starting here in the United States, have to ask ourselves if we are simply teaching or leading. What do people see in us? Do people see in us what they see in Jesus? Are we teaching

religious division or unity? Are we as religious leaders focused strictly on being authorities or are we examples of cosmic religious consciousness, of oneness in the presence of God? Once these questions are answered then I think religious leaders have to ask the rest of the world whether or not our religious traditions are helping us become one with each other and one with God? We shouldn't be surprised to discover there are similar messages in all the world's great religious traditions. Perhaps, this really means God is One.

Do you believe prayer and meditation can help unite us across religious and cultural divides?

I do. As I just said, if God is One, and if we are prayerful people, we are going to find the same vision, the same values, the same expectations about living them out in our lives in all our different religions. Then we don't have any justification for discrimination. If our prayer is real, we will become serene and just and live as equals among the peoples of the world. We must be at peace to bring peace. We must be just to bring justice. We must see all people—old, young, male, female—as equals, to be united.

Can our prayer and meditation also change our relationship with the earth?

Yes. We are talking about becoming one with the Creator whose creation is a reflection of the diversity and energy of God. Genesis is very clear about our responsibility for the earth. If God is Life; the earth is a living body, the handiwork of God. We cannot destroy it and call ourselves religious. That's a theology of domination. With mystical theology, we become cosmic.

What is at the heart of your prayer for the future?

Well, I hope that we will achieve human unity, not conformity—a unity that is based on respect, on reverence for other traditions and the way God has worked within them. I hope we can come to really revere one another. The Asian *Namaste* means "the divine in me greets the divine in you." That is reverence, and when we embrace that reverence, we will see religion as beckoning us towards cosmic revelation and not simply the institutionalization of rituals, creeds, and canons, even in sacred scriptures. My prayer is that we can go beyond the details of religion to its depth. If we can move this subject beyond personal piety, to the whole question of development of personal divine power, we will be light years away from the puny thing that religion has been allowed to deteriorate into over the years.

Do you think this is likely?

Oh absolutely! There is no doubt in my mind. Religion beautifies. That's the glory of it. It is just that we have to get more into real religion. The notion of religion as a kind of spiritual jacuzzi does not move me. Personal comfort is not a function of religion, although religion brings great comfort personally. Religion's purpose is cosmic, to bring the whole human race to another level of development.

It would be beautiful if we could reach that point some day.

Well, I'll meet you there. SJ

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Molting: A Process of Growth for Renewal

JAMES W. DONNELLY

Recently my wife and I celebrated our Golden Wedding Anniversary with our family in the Galapagos Islands off the coast of Ecuador. One day, as I surfaced from snorkeling, I encountered an overfed penguin asleep on a ledge just at the waterline in front of me. Our naturalist guide explained (from the zodiac boat awaiting us) that this bird was in the process of "molting"—that as it grows a penguin needs to shed its old feathers in order to grow a new set. But because this process rendered it unable to dive for food, it needed to fatten itself ahead of time to allow for the two-week molting period. That's what we were observing—a fattened penguin awaiting the growth of its new feathers. (Fortunately, she added, there were no predators to take advantage of the bird's immobility while it waited for the completion of the process.)

I have been reminded since of the Chesapeake Bay crabs that shed their shells annually to allow for their growth. (Sadly, their vulnerability renders them helpless to being netted and eaten; fried soft shell Chesapeake crabs are a delicacy.) The shedding of shells brought to mind the snake-skins I have encountered in our wood pile, left from the seasonal molting process as a snake grows in size and must shed the old skin to grow a bigger one. Then I thought of the seasonal mating of birds, like the male goldfinch in our yard, whose dull olive feathers become bright gold in spring to attract a mate.

Each of these, and there must be many more, participate in an instinc-

tual growth process that results in their renewal. I wondered whether there was not an analogy for us as mortals, even if we did not conceive of ourselves as a part of that same class of nature. I went to the Random House dictionary for some clarification:

"Molt: (1) (of birds, insects, reptiles, etc.) to cast or shed the feathers, skin, or the like, that will be succeeded by a new growth; (2) to cast or shed (feathers, skin, etc.) in the process of renewal." I wondered whether the editors considered mortals as a possibility when they included "etc." and "or the like" in their definition of molt—had they seen its having broader meanings that could possibly include us?

We as humans certainly do have molting periods in our lives as we grow: a baby's weaning would be a start, as would a child's learning to walk. But more appropriately, it seems to me, is that process whereby children (and parents) survive adolescence, a growing period in our lives that might be more comfortable if we all could just "fatten up" and hibernate on a ledge (or in a cave), awakening to life "re-feathered" and ready to continue on in a new relationship with our children (and they with us). And then there is that molting period of nurturing them (and ourselves) to have them leave the nest of our home and go out into the world as young fledglings on their own, to fend for themselves as young adults. And that's when we must adjust to being "empty nesters."

The phoebes that nest under the roof of our porch force their chicks out by just not feeding them, requiring them to leap from the heights of their natal nurture out into the vast world beyond, hoping that they will coordinate their wings quickly enough to learn to fly to a safe perch and

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not plummet to the harsh wood decking below. This does happen. Similarly, we as parents have no assurance that our children will find a safe perch, despite all of the instruction we provide. Learning to fly takes doing. Surviving the educational process, the work world, and marriage are all the same: we can provide all the nurture that we can (or that our children will absorb), but the final result comes from their doing it on their own. And that is something we have all experienced as we look back at it.

And this brings me to what I wondered as I encountered that molting penguin: what new "feathers" do I need as I grow into my future? SJ

James W. Donnelly lives with his wife near Annapolis, MD. He is an active member in his church as a Stephen Minister and Spiritual Guide. Often during the year he and his wife retreat to their beloved family barn in VT where he practices meditation and journaling.

Sacred Tempo

MARY JANE HIGGINS

Jesus,

How long ago you said to me
"May I have this dance?
Will you dance with me
to the last waltz?"
I must've forgotten the waltz—
Our dance turned into a gallop;
We spun and we spun
in the roar of my music,
And finally I sat this one out—
Exhausted from leading;
My feet tired and bleeding—
So now, Lord, You teach me the dance.

Jane,

Slowly, slowly, breathe with me.
Left or right, it's all the same.
Keep your eyes upon my face,
Listen when I speak your name.
Coming together, moving apart,
Move to my music, the beat of my heart.

Mary Jane Higgins, RSM is a spiritual and retreat director, and a teacher of Lay Ministers and Mercy Associates.

A Song for All Seasons

ARIE STAAL

Your beauty, Lord, still shines
even through the bare branches
of our winter time.

And we have surely been held
by Your hand
through times of grief and loss
though we have longed for spring.

Your ways are eternal
and past finding out
for we see only the seasons
of our mortal lives.

And so we seek after You
and await the restoration
of all things
in Your kingdom.

Arie Staal is Professor Emeritus at Eastern Michigan University. His poetry and fiction appear in a variety of journals, including *Christianity and Literature, Visions International, The Penwood Review, The Banner* and *Studio*. He enjoys music, golf, the natural world and writing from a Christian, mystical perspective.

A Prayer for Time

IRENE ZIMMERMAN

O God, I pray for days and years
between this birth and death.
Hold me in Your sacred breath
while I live and sing
within this vast cathedral.

Let earth's rood screen,
hiding Your eternal home,
take its long, slow time to crumble
as I crawl, walk, stumble
up the steps to Your high altar.

O Holy One—dare I ask still more? —
so that I do not die in fear,
give me a tiny glimpse, before
I go, of the sanctuary where
You live in light.

Irene Zimmerman, is a school sister of St. Francis, Milwaukee, WI, where she taught English and French in high school. She served in various clerical positions in institutions connected to her congregation and has volunteered as a poet and musician at a retreat center. She has authored four collections of poetry and has been published in several periodicals. The poems in her most recent book, *Incarnation*, are based exclusively on Scriptural themes and stories.

I Wish to Know You

CYNTHIA FRASER GRAVES

I wish to know You
as do the trees,
coming suddenly at night,
fierce and clean
wind that dances them wild
or rocks softly
in grasping branches,
culling sharply 'til
they can no longer endure the
rapture of airy embrace.

I wish to know You
as rocks know You,
rain sheeting dull surface,
releasing satin sheen and diamond heart
in the
moment of embrace.
I wish to know the heat
of Your steady gaze as
summer sun,
or Your freezing breath of winter
plunging me
into the province of
fire and ice.

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I wish to know You in the
joy of Your creations,
eternally in Your presence,
unprotected from Your Holy Face
by ego's veil,
the simple sacred mystery
of matter
dancing in adoration.

Cynthia Fraser Graves taught English for three decades before retiring in 2000 to write full-time. Her books include *Eyes Like Jewels: A Collection of Poems,* and her memoir *Never Count Crow: Love and Loss in Kennebunk, Maine.* She is the recipient of a first prize in Non-Fiction from the 2006 Ocean Park Writer's Conference. Cynthia is presently at work on a novel titled *Dusk on Route 1.*

Where is God When Stick Hit Floor?

RAMI SHAPIRO

"Where is God when stick hit floor?" Joshu Sasaki Roshi, my Zen master, asked over and over. Unfortunately, I was't listening.

This was the second day of a *sesshin*, a Zen meditation retreat, and my first opportunity to experience *sanzen*, a one-on-one meeting with the Roshi. The purpose of sanzen is to work on a *koan*, a Zen puzzle designed to open you to the profound simplicity of reality. I knew this as I prepared to meet with Roshi. What I didn't know was that Roshi spoke English.

All my previous encounters with Sasaki Roshi had been through a translator. Roshi lectured in Japanese, and the translator relayed his words in English. I assumed that was because Roshi spoke no English. So as I sat across from him in sanzen, I had no expectation of actually speaking with the man.

Roshi sat in front of me, his right hand tapping a gnarled piece of mahogany on the hardwood floor between us. His lips moved, sounds emerged, but I heard no question.

"Where is God when stick hit floor?"

My mind wandered. I'd signed up for this retreat because I was a Zenophile. I'd read every book by D. T. Suzuki and Alan Watts I could find. I'd purchased a set of meditation cushions, and I sat *zazen* every day. All I cared about was enlightenment, and this session was going to be great. A real Zen master, authentic Japanese chanting, simple vegan meals—man, this was the fast track to enlightenment. The Buddha pulled it off in eight days sitting under a tree; no way I couldn't do it in a Zen center with hot and

cold running water.

"Where is God when stick hit floor?"

What was this guy mumbling about? He must know I don't speak Japanese. My knees were getting stiff supporting my weight on the floor. Nice floor. Well polished. This was cool. Sitting across from a Zen Roshi. Right out of one of my Zen books. What is the sound of one hand clapping? What was your original face before you were born? Does a dog have a buddhanature?

"Where is God when stick hit floor?"

Oh, my God! Roshi spoke English! In fact, he had been speaking English this whole time. His Japanese accent was so thick, I hadn't recognized his speech as English. How many times had he asked me this question? The Zen master was giving me a koan, for God's sake, and I was ignoring him!

"Where is God when stick hit floor?"

"Uh, God is here?

For a second I thought Roshi was going to nod, say the Japanese equivalent of "Good boy," and give me a gold Zen sticker. Instead, he slapped my forehead lightly with his palm as if to say, "*Meshuggener*! Have you learned nothing from all I've taught you? From you I get no *nachas*." Or that's what he would have said if he'd been my rabbi, who found me equally dense and

> A real Zen master, authentic Japanese chanting, simple vegan meals—man, this was the fast track to enlightenment.

inattentive. Roshi scowled, picked up a brass bell, and rang me out of his room. "More zazen!"

During a Zen retreat, sazen always comes during *kinhin*, walking meditation. That way you can gracefully exit the sitting room and make your way to the Roshi's sanzen room. In this particular retreat, a line of chairs were assembled outside the sanzen room. Moving up the row, chair by chair, was a highly ritualized process. As the person sitting in the forwardmost chair left to enter Roshi's room, the rest of us would stand, bow, and advance one chair.

Upon entering the sanzen room, there was more elaborate bowing. You bowed from the waist, then got down on your knees, and then fell on your face, lifting your hands, palms up, off the floor three times. Then you stood, moved forward a bit, and repeated the process. It took three complete bowing cycles to reach Roshi. When done right, you ended up sitting on your knees, directly in front of him, your knees only inches from his.

This wasn't the Zen I'd read about in Alan Watt's books. His Zen was far looser and iconoclastic. So I expected to go to sanzen, give Roshi a hug, and share with him some of my deeper thoughts on the meaning of life. But tradition was tradition, and I didn't mind. In fact, it seemed to make the whole procedure more powerful. Most likely this was because I didn't grow up with it.

As a Jew, I knew other traditions. Once when my sister's boyfriend joined the family for dinner, my mother made brisket. The boyfriend, thinking we'd forgotten to supply the obvious beverage, brought a carton of milk out from the refrigerator. Sensing immediately that he was about to violate the law about strict separation of meat and milk, we all started shouting at him.

But that was Jewish tradition. *Narishkeit*—silliness.

What does it matter if you have milk with a piece of brisket? What did Moses know about brisket? Jewish law is tedious. That's why we have Reform Judaism to knock some sense into the tradition.

For me, though, Zen was another matter. Screw up the bowing and get tossed out on your ear? No problem. It was tradition. There is no such thing as Reform Zen. So I didn't mind the rules of Zen. The only thing I minded was seeing Roshi one-on-one.

Time after time, I went to sanzen hoping to impress Roshi with my Zen knowledge. I mean, I had a 4.0 GPA. How hard could this koan business be?

"Where is God when stick hit floor?"

It's really quite simple: God is here. God is everywhere. Didn't Roshi get that?

Now, Zen folks don't talk about a lot about God. Roshi was doing this for my sake. He knew I was Jewish, and he know I was considering going into the rabbinate. So being a master of *upaya*, skillfully teaching truth from the illusions at hand, Roshi spoke to me of God. Or, more precisely, he spoke to me about where the hell He was when the *farschtunkenah* stick hit the god damned floor.

I tried haiku. That ought to impress him:

stick in hand
stick on floor
sunlight slips through
slatted blinds

"More zazen," was his response.

I tried Nargarjuna's fourfold negation of reality: "There is a stick. There is no stick. There is neither stick nor no stick. There is . . . " I couldn't remember what came next.

"More zazen."

I must have visited the guy a dozen times, and I still couldn't figure out what the hell he was looking for. At last, I gave up.

While sanzen is mandatory in many sesshin, Roshi made it voluntary. I didn't have to see him if I didn't

want to. And I certainly didn't want to. But then it hit me: I was telling him where God was. I had to show him. Okay. One more time.

I took a seat in line to see Roshi, and I rehearsed in my mind what I would do. Do—not say. There was nothing to say. Zen is the transmission from mind to mind beyond words. I'd read that someplace. It was my Jewish head trapped in words that was causing me all these problems. This time, though, I'd nail it—no words.

Thus far I'd focused my answers on the universality of God when the stick hit the floor. But what I had to do was show Roshi that the stick was irrelevant. God was, is and always will be, whether the stick hits the floor or not. How could I demonstrate this deep insight? By grabbing that little stick and ripping the sucker out of the old man's hand, that's how. My stick. My God. My answer. My God, I'm brilliant!

Roshi rang in the next person, and in my mind, I calculated the precise distance between Roshi and the door. I figured out how much I'd have to space my bowing so that I'd end up in comfortable reach of the stick with enough leverage to wrench it out of his hands. Roshi was small, plump and old. I had height and youth on my side. Plus, I had the element of surprise. I mean, no one would ever have tried this before. Roshi rings me in.

"Where is God when stick hit floor?"

Hits. Hits the floor. I am a stickler for grammar, but it didn't matter—here was the stick, coming down. I lunged for the wood, wrapped my fingers around it, and yanked, breaking Roshi's grip. Then, triumphant, I sat back with the stick in my hand, proclaiming to the amazed and humbled Zen man: "No stick, no sound, just God!"

At least, that's what was supposed to happen.

Short, round Zen

masters are often stronger than they look. I did manage to grab the stick, but Roshi didn't let go. Instead, he grasped my wrist and flipped me over his shoulder. I let him keep the stick; I was busy tumbling onto the floor behind him.

"More zazen," he said, as I bowed and left.

How embarrassing. The old guy tossed me around like I was a sack of flour. My butt hurt, my ego was bruised and I was through with Zen forever. Except I couldn't leave. No one left sesshin. But so what? All I had to do was put in my time on the cushion and wait the whole thing out. Who cares that I can't get enlightened? It isn't as if it will go on my permanent record.

After a while I stopped fuming, I was bored. I just sat there. Hours passed. Then during the next round of walking meditation, Roshi rang the bell signaling sanzen. Just in case I forgot, my mind started yelling at me. "We aren't going in there! No way in hell are we going to submit ourselves to the embarrassment of trying to answer that stupid koan. Where is God when the stick hits—*hits*—the floor? Who cares?

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"Where is God when stick hit floor?"

Roshi was right in front of me, sitting on his cushions, tapping his stick on the floor. I had no idea how I'd gotten there. Without realizing it, I must have walked out of the meditation hall, taken my place in the sanzen line, moved up chair by chair, and performed the intricate bowing. One mistake in the ritual and I'd have been sent back to the meditation hall. No mistakes, save one: what was I doing back in sanzen?

"Where is God when stick hit floor?"

I don't know exactly what happened next. I can only reconstruct my actions based on where I found myself afterward. It seems that the instant Roshi's stick touched the floor, I flung myself at his feet, screaming at the top of my lungs, "God is here!" I suspect this is what happened, because when I regained awareness I was lying next to Roshi, my throat raw and my ears still ringing with the scream.

I scrambled to my knees, retook my place across from Roshi, and waited to be forever banished. But the old man was laughing hysterically. I'd like to believe he was laughing with me, except I wasn't laughing. I was on the verge of tears. Roshi thought that was funny as well.

"Goodah ahnsa," Roshi laughed, "Goodah ahnsa! Seventy-five percent. Now, more zazen."

Seventy-five percent? C? I hadn't gotten a C since freshman German. What would it take to get a B out of this guy? I never found out. Despite additional sesshin since then with Roshi and others, when it comes to enlightenment, I'm average. It's the best I've ever done.

As fierce and formal as he could be during sesshin, Sasaki Roshi could be just as relaxed and jovial after it was over. I watched as my fellow Zen students hugged Roshi and thanked him for

the sesshin. Though I hadn't gotten enlightened, I hadn't flunked either. So I wanted to say good-bye too. But I should have known better. Once I got within reach, Sasaki Roshi pinched my butt and said, "Roshi or rabbi—choose now!

I hated that. Not the pinching, though that hurt, but the choosing. I had thought that I could integrate the two traditions. Yet here was Roshi, my ass in his hand, telling me to choose.

Roshi had commented on the size of my bottom earlier in the sesshin while he was using my rear end as a model of how to sit—or rather not to sit. He'd lovingly (I guess) commented on the fact that my bottom covered so much of the cushion that it was hard to use me as a visual aid. Now he was telling me that, as it wide as my tuchus was, it was not wide enough to sit in both the *zendo* and the shul.

I looked at Roshi and smiled. "I am going to be a rabbi," I said with conviction. "Thank you, Roshi, for showing me that."

Roshi smiled and pinched my tuchus even harder. "Good," he hissed. "Be Zen rabbi!"

Rabbi Rami Shapiro is the founder of One River, an educational institution promoting dialogue on religion, science and ethics. He is a graduate of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion and holds doctoral degrees in both religion studies and divinity. He has been a student of Zen since 1968. Excerpted from *The Best Buddhist Writing 2009*, edited by Melvin McLeod and the editors of *Shambhala Sun* © 2009. Published by arrangement with Shambhala Publications, Inc. and used with permission. www.shambhala.com
Photo courtesy of John Schweikert Photography

IF THERE WERE ONE WORD THAT COULD ACT AS A STANDARD OF CONDUCT FOR ONE'S ENTIRE LIFE, PERHAPS IT WOULD BE 'THOUGHTFULNESS.'

CONFUCIUS

Listen and attend with the ear of your heart.

ST. BENEDICT

Throughout our day, we can take a break from our usual thoughts, and wake up to the magic and vastness of the world around us. This type of mindfulness practice is the most important thing we can do with our lives.

PEMA CHÖDRÖN

When I consider how the stars circle round and reappear year by year, when I look at the stars that shine in the winter sky, the north star and the morning star, each allotted a different task and service to perform, then, although I do not understand them, I realize that you, God, are in them.

ST. HILARY OF POITIERS

A thankful person is thankful
under all circumstances.
A complaining soul
complains even in paradise.

BAHA'U'LLAH

WITH THE GIFT OF LISTENING COMES THE GIFT OF HEALING.

CATHERINE DE HUECK DOHERTY

The ignorant say Love and God are different; none know that Love and God are the same. When they know that Love and God are the same, they rest in God's love.

TIRU-MULAR

WHEN DAYS GROW DARK AND NIGHTS GROW DREARY, WE CAN BE THANKFUL THAT OUR GOD COMBINES IN HIS NATURE A CREATIVE SYNTHESIS OF LOVE AND JUSTICE WHICH WILL LEAD US THROUGH LIFE'S DARK VALLEYS AND INTO SUNLIT PATHS OF HOPE AND FULFILLMENT. REVEREND MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

I have known from early youth that nonviolence is not a cloistered virtue to be practiced by the individual for his peace and final salvation, but it is a rule of conduct for the whole of society.

MAHATMA GANDHI

INVEST IN THE HUMAN SOUL. WHO KNOWS, IT MIGHT BE A DIAMOND IN THE ROUGH.

MARY MCLEOD BETHUNE

GATHERING WITH OTHER SEEKERS CREATES A FIELD OF RECEPTIVITY THAT WE CAN ALL TAP INTO. AS WE COME TOGETHER TO PRAY AND CELEBRATE AND WORSHIP—BRINGING THE FOCUS OF OUR ATTENTION ON GOD, GOOD, LOVE, SERVICE, AND BEAUTY—WE DELVE DEEPER INTO THAT AWARENESS.

REVEREND MICHAEL BECKWITH

Concerns Focus Our Lives

JACK KIRK

The pursuit of Spirit-led concerns can lead to an amazing simplification of our lives. For most of us there are too many heart-rending appeals, too many noble causes. Trying to respond to a large number, we become overburdened and weary until we reach the point of "social concerns burnout." We begin to ask, "What's the use?" How many do we know who have taken this route and ended up cynical and sitting on the sidelines while the great cosmic battle between the forces of light and darkness rages on?

A sense of inward peace about a particular project or course of action is an indication that it has the approval of the Spirit. Francis Wickes, a Jungian therapist, used to tell of a troubled patient whose life was crammed full of activity. She had a recurring dream in which she died and went to Heaven. The gatekeeper inquires her name, and the only identification she can give is that she was the woman who was head of fifty-seven committees. She did not know the peace of the Holy Spirit.

Speaking of Spirit-led concern, Thomas Kelly, the beloved professor at Haverford College in the 1930's said, "It is a particularization of my responsibility in a world too vast and a lifetime too short for me to carry all responsibilities." He went on to point out that "the loving Presence does not burden us equally with all things, but considerately puts upon each of us just a few central tasks, as emphatic responsibilities. For each of us these special undertakings are our share in the joyous burdens of love."

While recognizing "the

multitude of good things that need doing," Kelly assured us, "toward them all we feel kindly, but we are dismissed from active service in most of them. And we have an easy mind in the presence of desperately real needs which are not our direct responsibility. We cannot die on every cross, nor are we expected to." Paying close attention to the Inward Guide and responding positively only to those undertakings and appeals for service that have our name written on them leads to a life that is remarkably focused and effective in advancing the Kingdom.

It seems that much of our social witness has attention deficit disorder. Some of it is no more lasting than a bright bubble in the summer sun. A spiritually-based concern is for the long haul. It calls one to sustained involvement over a significant amount of time. The life given over to a few Spirit-led concerns is a long distance run, not a sprint. It is Desmond Tutu in South Africa or Mother Teresa in Calcutta. It is choosing a career of teaching in a Friends School where the salaries are lower or faithfully unlocking and locking the meeting house each Sunday across the years. It is a long obedience in the *same* direction.

Jack Kirk attended West Chester Friends School, then Westtown School, where Thomas Brown's Quakerism class first awakened him to "the exciting spiritual dynamics in Quakerism." Today he and his wife live in NC where they are members of Greensboro Monthly Meeting, "which truly embodies the Quaker testimony of community." They have two children and five grandchildren. Excerpted from *Kindling a Life of Concern, Spirit-Led Quaker Action* (Pamphlet #404) © Pendle Hill Publications 2009 and is reprinted with permission.

My Guru and I

EK ONG KAAR KAUR KHALSA

I remember when I first left home for college. The insecurity of making new friends. The longing for connection. Searching to tell a story about myself that would capture people's interest and create relationships. Age eighteen, wandering through the dorms, knowing no one, seeking to invent an identity different from what I had as a child—an identity that would work in this boundless and unknown new life.

Slowly, over time, the conversations began. And I remember that so many people found connections with each other, not necessarily by what they loved, or enjoyed; but by sharing their pain with one another. What they had experienced as a child. What injustices they felt in their own lives, and in the world.

Through the months and years, some bonds formed from shared interest. But other bonds formed from the opposite—from what people felt angry about. What they rebelled against. What they wanted to see altered in themselves or in society.

A few years later, a window began to open up inside of me. A small little glimmer of a voice said, "It is not my wounds that make me beautiful." I began to resist my own self-definition that was rooted in painful memories of the past or anger at the state of the world. I could feel something else inside—something that didn't need any of that anger or pain—to be worthy, to be special, to be strong, to have friends and create connection. There was another Identity deep within—pure, happy and light.

Eventually, the *Shabad Guru* came into my life. And this feeling of defining myself by my inner negative feelings versus defining myself by my inner positive Light took on a whole new dimension.

What I have found by meditating on the Shabad Guru as manifested in the Guru Granth Sahib is that the Guru does not

relate to the negative at all. In fact, there's been many a time when I've come across a line and said to myself, "The Guru can't say that, can He?"

The Guru's sayings totally challenge the way I think about the world. Here are a couple of examples:

> The one whose touch pollutes the world,
> Even he knows Your mercy.
> [Ravdas, GGS, p 1106]

> So many are
> Continually beaten down
> By endless pain and hunger.
> Even these
> Are your Gifts to us,
> O Great Giver.
> [Guru Nanak, Japji: 25]

> This poisonous world
> That you behold
> Is really simply
> The Divine
> In form.
> [Guru Amar Das, Anand: 36]

In my journey since my college days, I have been able to redefine "me" to myself in much more positive terms. But the teachings of the Shabad Guru challenge me to go even further.

The Shabad Guru asks me to see the positive aspect of any and every situation. That no matter how negative it may appear or seem on the surface, the Light of the Divine is at the heart of it. The hand of the Creator is guiding it. It has purpose beyond what my mind can know or imagine.

We see a lot of ugliness in life. We see a lot of pain. And what happens is that when we see this ugliness, somehow our mind decides to live there. To wallow in it. To think that happiness, peace, and bliss rests outside of ourselves. We complain bitterly, or feel victimized when the physical environment does

not act the way we want. Or worse—when the environment harms us.

But the Guru's wisdom is a defense against that. The Guru's words ask us to enter into a direct, transcendent experience that the Divine lives in the essence of all things. And whatever is happening is happening by the hand of the One, which guides all and does all. It's a difference of horizon. The mind can have a very finite, limited horizon. This moment. This lifetime. What I want. What I don't want. Constantly measuring every person and event against an idealized fantasy of what would serve "me."

Or the mind can have an infinite horizon. One that sees this life in the context of a vaster, much larger play. One that sees all things, including oneself, being carried along. Even the ugliest, most terrible, awful experiences can be re-framed in a positive way.

That is what the power of the Shabad gives, so that the mind can feel genuinely positive even in the face of the worst situations. That is victory. That is *Fateh*! And that is a human life worth living.

In celebrating the Anniversary of Guru Gaddi, we learn and re-learn to appreciate the Guru's message of Chardhi Kalaa!

May the songs of Guru Granth Sahib transform our thoughts so that we may leave every negative feeling behind and bask in the bliss.

Ek Ong Kaar Kaur Khalsa is a writer and teacher and currently serves as the Creative Director for Sikh Dharma International.. She travels around the world sharing the wisdom of Sikh Dharma and teaching Kundalini Yoga as taught by Yogi Bhajan. You may visit her blog Random Calligraphy, ekongkaar.blogspot.com

Charter for Compassion

Compassion is not a popular virtue.
~Karen Armstrong

The Charter for Compassion, unveiled on November 12, 2009, is a cooperative effort to restore not only compassionate thinking but, more importantly, compassionate action to the center of religious, moral and political life. It is the fulfillment of Karen Armstrong's 2008 TED prize wish and is made possible by the generous support of the Fetzer Institute. This charter was crafted by an interfaith council, comprised of people from all over the world, including Sr. Joan Chittister.

Compassion lies at the heart of all religious and ethical systems, enabling us to put ourselves in the shoes of others and experience life from their perspective. As a spiritual practice, let's answer the call to creative, practical and sustained action in meeting the political, moral, religious, social and cultural challenges of our times by logging onto www.charterforcompassion.org and signing up along with thousands of others as an expression of our commitment to living more compassionate lives. The text of the charter follows:

The principle of compassion lies at the heart of all religious, ethical and spiritual traditions, calling us always to treat all others as we wish to be treated ourselves. Compassion impels us to work tirelessly to alleviate the suffering of our fellow creatures, to dethrone ourselves from the center of our world and put another there, and to honor the inviolable sanctity of every single human being, treating everybody, without exception, with absolute justice, equity and respect.

It is also necessary in both public and private life to refrain consistently and empathically from inflicting pain. To act or speak violently out of spite, chauvinism, or self-interest, to impoverish, exploit or deny basic rights to anybody, and to incite hatred by denigrating others—even our enemies—is a

denial of our common humanity. We acknowledge that we have failed to live compassionately and that some have even increased the sum of human misery in the name of religion.

We therefore call upon all men and women—to restore compassion to the centre of morality and religion—to return to the ancient principle that any interpretation of scripture that breeds violence, hatred or disdain is illegitimate—to ensure that youth are given accurate and respectful information about other traditions, religions and cultures—to encourage a positive appreciation of cultural and religious diversity—to cultivate an informed empathy with the suffering of all human beings—even those regarded as enemies.

We urgently need to make compassion a clear, luminous and dynamic force in our polarized world. Rooted in a principled determination to transcend selfishness, compassion can break down political, dogmatic, ideological and religious boundaries. Born of our deep interdependence, compassion is essential to human relationships and to a fulfilled humanity. It is the path to enlightenment, and indispensable to the creation of a just economy and a peaceful global community.

To share your stories of compassion and become a member of the Charter log onto:

www.charterforcompassion.org

Relinquishing Judgment

GREGORY FRUEHWIRTH

In the Third Showing of her Revelations of Divine Love, the English medieval mystic Julian of Norwich tells us that she saw God "in a point," which means that she saw God in direct metaphysical insight, present in all things and as the agent of all that is done. Julian experiences God as an unconditioned joy penetrating all things and events. Furthermore, in this showing, God goes beyond just showing this to Julian, God tests her by inviting her to let go of her own judgments about what is good or bad, trivial or important, so that she can release herself to share the divine blissfulness with God. As Julian wrote:

> I saw God in a point by which vision I understood that He is in all things . . . A man looks upon some deeds as well done and some deeds as evil, but our Lord does not look upon them so; for just as all that has being in nature is of God's creating, so everything that is done is in the character of God's doing . . . And all this He showed most blessedly, meaning this: "See, I am God. See, I am in everything. See, I do everything. See, I never lift my hands from my works, nor ever shall, without end. See, I lead everything to the end I ordained for it from without beginning by the same Power, Wisdom, and Love with which I made it. How would anything be amiss?" Thus powerfully, wisely, and lovingly was the soul tested in this vision.

"See, I am God. See, I am in everything. See, I do everything . . . how could anything be amiss?" In response, we might well say, looking at our world or our own souls, that a great deal is amiss. Just as Julian was tested by this vision—powerfully, wisely, and lovingly—we, her readers, are now tested.

Later in the Revelations, Julian will indeed argue with God for thirteen chapters about how all things could be well; but at this point, Julian says, "I saw truthfully that it was appropriate that I needs must assent with great reverence, rejoicing in God." Julian leaves behind the human judgment that sees some things as noble and others as base, some things as good and others as bad, and surrenders herself to the unconditioned play of divine joy in all things just as they already are.

Is this responsible? Is it safe? What does this mean for us?

It's true that most of us are not mystics like Julian. We generally don't live with a clear, immediate vision of God's joy transfusing all things! I am certainly not suggesting that we clench our fists and squint our eyes, to have this kind of experience with Julian. Rather, just as Julian was invited in the Third Showing to set aside her human faculty of judging things to join in God's vision of all-pervading light and bliss, so we can make an experiment with ourselves with what it feels like to set aside the judging faculty in the trust that God is in all things. This is not something we argue about; it is an approach to reality we can step into and try on for ourselves. Through such an experimental practice, we can live as though we saw what Julian did, and from observing the results, we can see if it is a fruitful approach to reality. What we discover in this kind of practice, living without the mystic's clear vision but within the truth she discloses, is a more skillful and fruitful way of engaging with suffering and the conflict in our world. What does it feel like in ourselves when we stop firing away in our judgmental faculty, saying how bad we or other people, our life-situation, or the world's situation is? Furthermore, how does this relinquishing of the judging faculty affect our capacity to act for the good?

Here I can only share my experience of this. When I am in the presence of some deep wrong, some terrible suffering or tragic evil, I feel in my body the grip of fear and dread. Clearly, I am reacting to a feeling of being threatened, and the natural

instinct is to start judging things or people as bad, which is a way of trying to push them away, refuse them reality, separating myself from them. But instead of following this bodily experience of fear and letting it roll forward into a litany of the judgmental, I can choose instead to unhook the judging faculty and to remain deep in the felt awareness of my own being. I want to emphasize that in doing this, I am not at all forcing myself to think about anything. I am not making myself think about how good God is or telling myself, "OK, Gregory, remember that God's bliss is transfusing all things, so try really hard to see this or think really hard to figure it out." Instead of thinking and judging in the presence of some tragic evil, I unhook the thinking and judging faculty (just as Julian did in the Third Showing). I accept my total incomprehension of evil and suffering; I accept too that I cannot see or understand how any of this is of God. Instead of trying to understand things or figure them out, I am just there, just present with the evil or tragic suffering with the whole of my being, and I am there with whatever feelings of fear or anxiety it is stirring up in me, letting these run around my body. The one thing that I am not doing is making a judgment about it.

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As I reflect on this experiment, three elements in the experience seem significant to me.

The first element

is the awareness of a deep paradox contained in negative judgment. When our feelings of fear or discomfort roll forward into negative judgments, we are attempting by these judgments to distance ourselves from the threatening reality. We are trying to say, "I am here, but that bad thing is over there." But if we look at what happens when we create a negative judgment and identify ourselves with it, what we find is that the judgment effectively connects or locks us into the threatening reality. We find ourselves in a rivalry with it, telling it in one form or another that it should not be. In trying to push it away as "bad" we are stuck to it and defined by it.

Consequently, when we surrender the instinctual reaction of negative judgment in the face of tragedy or suffering, we discover that we gain a capacity to be uniquely present to that suffering or tragedy, but not having our inner being determined by it. Putting this positively, I would describe this second element of the experiment by saying that when I practice this unhooking of the faculty of judgment, I have a deep sense of presence and connection with people, animals, or plants in their suffering. I know myself as profoundly with them, yet I am not flooded by their agony and lost in it. In a strange way, there is no boundary between me and the suffering reality because I have not put one there, and as long as I do not put a negativity there between me and the threatening reality, it has no power over me. It just is, and I just am. We are both there.

The third element to note in this paradox-filled experiment, is that I begin to feel myself uniquely empowered and strong. I emphasize the word empowered; I feel myself to be strong, whole and present and able in strength to give something good to this reality. This is compassionate action. It is also what Christians call intercession and what the Buddhist Pema Chödrön in her many writings calls *tonglen*. Instead of simply becoming negative myself—angry, despairing, envious—in the face of some tragedy or evil, instead of allowing the evil there to colonize my own being, I can be present to it in strength and I can then creatively choose how I

want to respond to it.

As a Christian, I experience this strange combination of presence to a tragic or evil event, an experience of vulnerability and compassion yet non-determination, to be an identification of myself with Jesus crucified and a participation in the mystery of his death. In Jesus on the Cross, we see God is revealed as profoundly present and vulnerable to the suffering and evil in our world, but not determined or defined by it, not locked into rivalry with it, precisely because God has not condemned it or tried to "shove it away." This is the beginning of creative redemption.

The Third Showing of Julian's Revelations of Divine Love challenges us with a perception of God as a life of unconditional joy filling all things and all events. We can't understand how this could be. We aren't ask to understand it. We aren't even asked to think about it. What we can do is rather to begin to release ourselves to this reality in trust, as a kind of experiment in silencing the judging faculty, and to see what kind of consciousness this creates in us. This is not something to argue about or figure out; it is something to try in the middle of life itself. We might discover how paradoxically self-defeating the judging action is—how it binds us into the negativity—and how strong, clear-headed and creative in compassionate response we can be once we have relinquished it. SJ

Fr. Gregory Fruehwirth is a brother in *The Order of Julian of Norwich*, an order of contemplative monks and nuns in the Episcopal church. Having been the Order's groundskeeper for many years, he currently serves as the elected Superior of the Order. He has recently published his first book *Words of Silence*.

Night's Jewels

SUSAN LANDON

We're bathed in silence.
Blue-black the night
around us, bright white
the lights of town.

Near the southern horizon,
night's jewels gleam -
a dainty crescent moon,
Jupiter afire, gentle Venus.

If human lights went out,
we could sit quietly,
gaze into eternity, let
these jewels adorn our night.

Susan Landon's work has appeared in numerous literary magazines, online periodicals and anthologies, including *The Aurorean, Borderlands* and *Sahara*. Most recently, her work has appeared online in *Fairfield Review* and *Perigee*.

Pretty Thing

KEVIN HEATON

Midst the dew in lonesome mourning,
subtle flutter as he sings,
seeking solace in the sadness,
tender song on crimson wing.

Tufted messenger of gladness,
feathered courier of peace,
borne on wings no longer broken,
trilled sweet psalm of the redeemed.

Kevin Heaton's poetry is published in *Pembroke Magazine, the Kansas Poetry Archive,* and *The Council Grove Republican.* He has produced Country Music albums including, *Tin Roof Sunday,* and the sound track for *Oklahoma Faded Love*, a full length music video.

the quiet hand

GARETH DICKER

love wipes the cheek of the devil,
wraps tightly around pain, and warms tears.
love pats the back of despair, hugs fear,
reaches into the abused and the denied,
raises the lost from the ground to their knees
and launches them into the sky.
love is a blade of grass,
sprouting under the sun's fingers,
curling from the clouds' winter whiteness.
it holds down the fort of compassion,
always prepared to battle the void below.
love makes doves of wolves,
and tear stained smiles of furrowed brows and clenched jaws.

Gareth Dicker is a senior at West Windsor-Plainsboro High School South in Princeton Junction, NJ. He has been writing poetry since middle school and two of his poems were published in the school's literary magazine. *Echoes*. Upon graduation, he plans to major in Mechanical Engineering.

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Not Choosing the Sure Thing

LORNA KELLEY

We can never really know the ramifications of our seemingly ordinary actions and we rarely have the ability to recognize momentous events as they unfold before our very eyes. I once read something Nikos Kazantzakis had written which struck me quite forcefully; he said, "To choose the sure thing is treason for the soul." We can look at three men who, at a pivotal time in their lives, did not choose the sure thing and that choice was to have a huge impact on mankind.

Siddhartha was born in northern India in what is now Nepal, circa 563 B.C. At the time of his birth his father King Suddhodana was told by a seer that his son would either grow up to be a great king or a great holy man. The King, not happy at the prospect of having a mendicant son, surrounded Siddhartha with opulence, beauty and culture and shielded him from all knowledge of religion and human suffering. The prince was given a fine education, was a good athlete, and from all accounts, was gracious of face, form and manner.

In his late twenties Siddhartha was to have a radical spiritual insight. Out riding with his charioteer, he encountered an old person, a sick person and a corpse; he asked his companion if all who are born, even he, are subject to those stages. His companion affirmed that indeed all who are born are subject to old age, sickness and death. Then the young prince saw a wandering monk and inquired why this person looked so serene amidst all the suffering around him. He was told the man was a monk, one who had relinquished all worldly things and led a life of renunciation and meditation.

Very shortly after his encounter, Siddhartha left his palaces, left his family, relinquished his material comforts, and for the next six years he undertook the most arduous ascetic spiritual practices. He was determined to understand why human birth keeps us on a continual wheel of suffering. At one point he was so thin from his rigorous fasting that it was said one could see his back bone through his stomach. Eventually he became aware that he was not going succeed in his quest by torturing the body; it was not through arduous physical disciplines that insight occurred but by being at rest in the mind—through meditation.

He was in Bodh Gaya, a village in the Indian state of Bihar, where he sat down under a Bodi tree with the resolute determination that he would not rise from his seat until he had gained enlightenment. Then began his battle with the forces of darkness, but Siddhartha just sat knowing all those appearances of lust, cruelty, greed, delusion were only risings in the mind—they had no power and once he saw them clearly, they dissolved. By dawn on the forty-ninth day, he had gained his Enlightenment, he had become the Buddha—the Awakened One.

The point of this story is to say that at any time Siddhartha could have chosen the sure thing. He could have said to himself: this is ridiculous; I'm naked, starving, cold. I'm going to return to my father, to my palaces, to the comforts of my princely life. But Siddhartha did not move; he sat under that tree and pressed on. And because he didn't choose the sure and comfortable thing, countless millions over the last twenty-six hundred years, have followed his teachings, gained insight and been able to pass on the rich and amazing Buddhist dharma.

If I had seen Siddhartha sitting under the Bodi tree, would I have seen anything? I doubt it. I might have had a

glancing thought: Oh there's another one of those emaciated fellows who like to sit and meditate in the roots of trees; why doesn't he do something, get a job maybe, instead of just sitting about? It would have been nothing special to me, nothing that unusual, nothing extra-ordinary. Certainly nothing that would have registered as having a future monumental, positive and enriching effect on humanity.

Five hundred years after the Buddha received his Enlightenment, Jesus, a Jew, was born and raised in Israel. In his early thirties, Jesus began to preach. He taught about the love of God and the Kingdom of Heaven. He was preaching about a God who was not just in the Temple but in the heart. He was an advocate for the poor and was getting himself into deeper and deeper waters with the authorities—overturning tables in the temple precincts—not exactly the way to ingratiate oneself with the authorities.

It was Passover; thousands of pilgrims were expected into Jerusalem and the Romans were intent of quelling any signs of unrest. Already one of their soldiers had been murdered by a fellow called Barabbas. They wanted no more trouble. Jesus, who was able to gather huge crowds around him, had just made a spectacle of himself by riding into the city on the back of a donkey. In response, an impassioned multitude had danced about him as he entered the city and placed palm fronds in his path.

> I find it imperative that I live my life with awareness and stay true to my heart.

Without a doubt, Jesus

was in trouble with both the temple priests and the Romans. He celebrated the Passover with his disciples, and after the meal they left that Upper Room to rest in an olive garden just a little distance from the city. Jesus in that moment could have chosen the sure thing. Like the Buddha he could have said, "This is ridiculous; what on earth am I doing? I've been teaching for over three years and my disciples still don't understand what I'm saying—they're still arguing about their position in the coming Kingdom. I could get out of here right now while I have time. I could go back to Galilee, marry that nice girl, have children and settle down to a peaceful life among my own people."

However, Jesus did not choose the sure thing; he kept praying and stayed, and when they came to arrest him, he simply surrendered to the next thing. And of course we know the rest of the story. But Jesus took on that mission and chose to stay with the situation as it unfolded and to hold firm to his belief that no matter what happened to him (no matter if he was to be subjected to an excruciatingly painful death) no matter how it appeared, he was being guided by a force that was loving. Because Jesus didn't chose the sure thing, mankind has been unquantifiably enriched; we have been given an example of the possibilities of living a noble life.

If I had been there in Jerusalem on that Friday when Jesus was dragging his cross, being pushed on by the Roman soldiers, would I have stopped in awe and wonder? Would I have been able to say: here before me is an event which will change the course of human history from this day forth? No. I probably would have said: Oh there goes another who couldn't keep his mouth shut. When we today talk of the crucifixion we know which crucifixion we're referring to, but in Jesus' time crucifixions were a common occurrence; it was the standard form of punishment, not unusual at all.

Two thousand years after Jesus there was another man who was to have a huge impact—his name was Bill Wilson. Bill Wilson, with his wife Lois, lived in New York; he was a hopeless drunk. He had sought help; he wanted to put an end to his misery and the misery to which he was subjecting his wife, but nothing had worked—he always picked up the drink again. After yet another bender he was in Towns hospital and while there, out of the depths of his despair he cried out to God, (if there was such a being) to help him. In relating his own story, Bill Wilson goes on to describe having a profound spiritual experience where "I felt lifted up, as though the great clean wind of a mountain top blew through and through."

He knew he had experienced a healing grace, and he left Towns with the firm resolve not to drink, but he was now convinced he had the disease of alcoholism and although he might not want to drink, the disease wanted to drink, and that his new-found sobriety was contingent on his helping others. Much like the Samuel Taylor Coleridge's epic poem: "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," where the mariner was compelled to relate his story of killing the albatross which the crew had been relying on in order to steer them out of dangerous waters; the killing of the bird left them without a guide and eventually all perished except the ancient mariner, Bill Wilson had to tell his story to another drunk in order to stay sober and sane himself.

With great enthusiasm he plunged into his new-found mission—telling his story to other drunks. After six months with not one new recruit to show for all his efforts, he felt he had failed—not one man had remained sober. Then Lois pointed out that he had not failed because he was sober; that he had enjoyed the longest period of sobriety in years. Around this time, Bill Wilson was invited to Akron, Ohio, to clinch a business deal. He was an ambi-

tious man; he had been very successful at some earlier time but now felt mortified that he and his wife had to live in other people's homes and that Lois was working at Macy's—all because he couldn't provide enough income for them. This deal in Akron sounded like the answer to his prayers. He embarked on the journey with high hopes.

The business deal went south—completely failed. That evening, totally alone and standing in the lobby of the Mayfair Hotel Bill Wilson could hear the sure thing coming from one end of the lobby—it was the bon vivant atmosphere and gaiety in the bar. He didn't want to get drunk of course; he just wanted "one to take the edge off." He didn't think of consequences; alcoholism veils consequences; he just knew he could get out of this hideous day, and there in the bar was relief—the bar was the sure thing.

But Bill Wilson didn't choose the sure thing; he knew he was on very thin ice—the disease, like a siren, was calling to him. He reached deep inside, asked for help and in that lobby Bill Wilson turned to walk away from the bar towards the church directory. He called a Rev. Walter Tunks who gave him a list of ten persons, the last person on the list was a Henrietta Seiberling who seemed most interested in Bill's story; she knew a prominent doctor in town who couldn't stop drinking, and everyone would be delighted if Bill Wilson would talk to him.

When Doctor Bob was told that this stranger was willing to visit with him, he grumpily said that he would give him fifteen minutes. Bill Wilson stayed with Dr. Bob four months. Dr. Bob's sobriety date marks the beginning of Alcoholics Anonymous. The fellowship of AA celebrates its anniversary not on the day Bill Wilson stopped drinking, but on June 10th the date Dr. Bob put down the drink for the last time.

Now if Bill Wilson had chosen the sure thing that

evening in Akron, countless millions would have been doomed to a life of perpetual hopelessness where there are but three inevitable outcomes to the disease of untreated alcoholism: jail, institutionalization or death.

If I had been sitting in the lobby of the Mayfair Hotel that evening, I might have seen a man in his late thirties looking a little downcast. I might have seen him pondering and then watched him walk toward the phone. I would never have been able to discern the amazing implications of this man's turning in the lobby. I would never have been able to hear Heaven holding its breath wondering which he would choose. I think it interesting to ponder that Alcoholics Anonymous is born out of what the world considers failure—the business deal had gone belly up. Malcolm Muggeridge an English commentator, once said of Jesus: in earthly terms his mission was a failure. I often wonder if Bill Wilson had had a successful day if he would have had that same dilemma in the lobby, rather the thought might have come, "See, I'm perfectly fine. I've just pulled off this great deal, I can certainly handle one drink."

Reflecting on these lives I find it imperative that I live my life with awareness in order that I don't automatically chose the sure thing, imperative that I am able to stop and stay true to my heart in the very day-to-dayness of living. How many times in my life does Heaven hold its breath wondering what I will choose? What might the implications be for future generations of my seemingly ordinary choices? SJ

Lorna Kelley born and raised in England moved to the US and became first female Fine Art Auctioneer in America at Sotheby's. At a turning point in her life she was inspired to travel to India to meet Mother Teresa and work with her Missionaries of Charity tending to the poorest of the poor in Calcutta. This remarkable journey is chronicled in her first book, *The Camel Knows the Way.* Lorna is an avid student of Buddhism.

God Smiled Through My PC Screen

ALBERT M. LEWIS

God smiled through my PC screen and said: "Come on, put down your work and let's go play for the rest of the day. Take my hand and we'll walk to the pond. I'll show you how the fish dart in and out of the sun, how they swim from here to there in search of food and light. And look at their eyes; how they just roll and turn in all ways and seem like they could pop out; as if they are held by a thin nerve or string. I made them that way. It's best for them. Oh, see the frogs on the pads? They just bask in the sun and wait for the flies and bugs to come by. Then the frogs launch their tongues and lunch is served. (Sure, the frogs croak in the heat of the night and you wake up and wish they were hushed. But then they would not be true to who they are; and so what if you toss and turn for a few hours? You can still find time to sleep. Your life, like the frog's, is short. Give each sound a place in your heart!) The frog's life is a good one as long as he can keep an eye out for the snakes and birds of prey. That's why I gave them eyes like the fish. Small guys need all the help they can get. You know what I mean."

"Now, look at the leaf on this tree. Do you see all the veins that run through it? I call them the leaf's lifeline; just like the ones on your hand. Each leaf and each hand is one of a kind. See, no two leaves or hands or lives are the same. This leaf can't be that leaf—and your life (and all the rest that makes you) is one of a kind. My work is sort of 'old world,' if you get what I mean. One plan, one piece, one task at a time. Do it well. Be true to your gifts. Smile when it's done. And be sure to play."

"I love to show off my world. But more than that I love when you see it through my eyes and your view turns out to be just like mine. Life is hard and I know it. But it's all part of a plan . . . and play is a big piece. Thank you for the time we shared. It still makes my day!" SJ

Albert M. Lewis serves as rabbi of Congregation Beth El in Traverse City, MI. He is an adjunct professor of psychology and gerontology at Aquinas College and a columnist for the *Grand Rapids Press.* Please visit his website at soulsoundsbook.com

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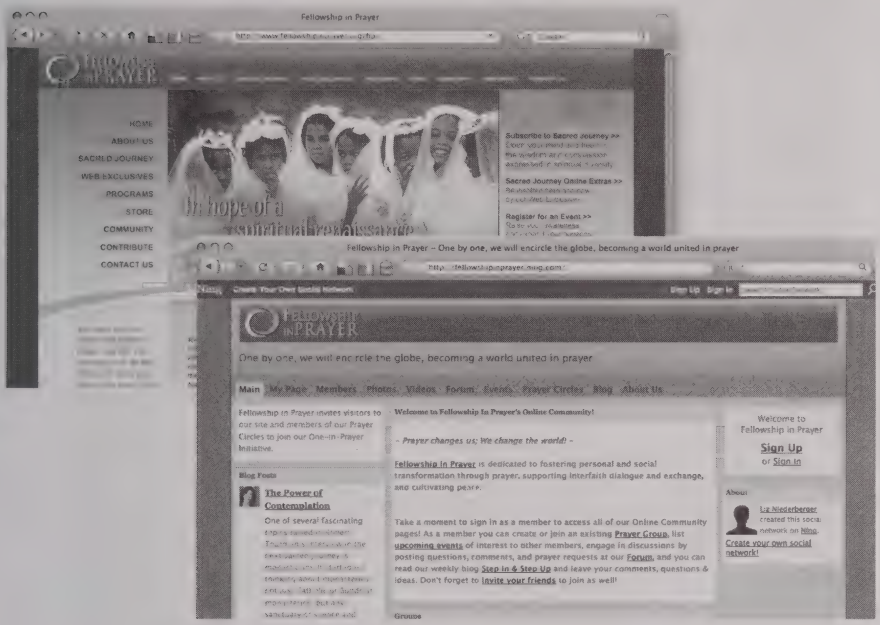
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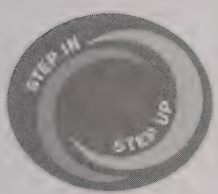

Step In & Step Up

Our New Weekly Blog

DEEANN WEIR

Be sure to read Fellowship in Prayer's new blog authored by DeeAnn Weir. Join her in reflecting on the interface between spiritual practice and deep personal or social transformation. Consider the profound wisdom rooted in religious diversity.

DeeAnn will be sharing inspiration gleaned from reading Sacred Journey, from the depth and breadth of her own spiritual practice, from pressing social issues and—once you join the conversation—your questions and comments.

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Accessing our Best Inner Resources for Service and Social Action:
Meditations on Natural Wisdom and Compassion

John Makransky, ordained Tibetan Buddhist lama, professor of Buddhism and Comparative Theology at Boston College

Keynote
R. Gustav Niebuhr, associate professor in Religion & the Media, Syracuse University; author of *Beyond Tolerance: Searching for Interfaith Understanding in America*; former New York Times National Correspondent and Washington Post National Staff Writer

Multi-Faith Plenary
Joan Chittister OSB, author and international lecturer
Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman, professor at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion
Zen Master Bernie Glassman, founder and spiritual director of Zen Peacemakers
Daisy Khan, executive director of the American Society for Muslim Advancement

Moderated by Father **Edward Beck** CP, co-host of ABC's Focus On Faith

Workshop Leaders:
Rabia Terri Harris; Rabbi Justus Baird; Rev. Paul B. Raushenbush; Amy Rakusin & Phil Fraiesi; Beverly Sanford; Sohaib Sultan; Dr. Robert Jones; Rev. Becca Stevens; Rahul Subramaniam & Shannon Mercer; Fr. Edward Beck; Miriam MacGillis OP; Zen Master Bernie Glassman; Rev. Michael Prewitt; John Tyler; Revs. Jill & Tim Geoffrian; Rev. Rebecca Laird; Rev. Tom Ward; Dr. Balbinder Singh Bhogal; Rev. Dr. Michael J. Christensen; Rajiv Malhotra; Rev. Michael Pergola, Rose Mary Dougherty SSND; and Rev. Robert Corin Morris . . .

Closing Interfaith Service
Fr. Edward Beck and Rev. James Forbes

The Liturgical Year

The Spiraling Adventure of the Spiritual Life

BY JOAN CHITTISTER

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In this illuminating book, Chittister provides an historical context for understanding the liturgical year and highlights how the ancient practices associated with church seasons and holy days remain meaningful for contemporary Christians.

Chittister invites her readers on a spiritual adventure in which we encounter the dramatic events and lively characters that were part of Jesus' existence. With a compelling voice and poetic flair, she helps us to develop a full appreciation of the Christian message over time and to mark liturgical celebrations in a way that attunes us to God at work in the unfolding stories of our own lives.

Chittister writes, "Liturgical time is the arc that affixes the layers of life. It binds heaven and earth into one and the same rhythm. Rather than give ourselves totally to life as we know it, here and now, liturgical time raises our sights above the dailiness of life to the essence of life." She offers an insightful, creative and inspiring perspective—one that can teach our souls to dance once again.

The Liturgical Year is the fifth volume of the Ancient Practices Series released by Thomas Nelson.

For more information or to order visit www.thomasnelson.com

Dusting Without Raising More Dust

GARY THORP

Dust figures in one of my favorite stories about a young Zen monk. Having just moved into a new temple, the monk was filled with energy and dedication and surpassed all the other monks in his zeal for cleaning. During work practice, he was an absolute tornado, running throughout the rooms and hallways, sweeping and polishing and dusting everything in sight. One day his teacher asked him, "What are you doing?" The monk beamed a large smile in the direction of his teacher and said, "I am working hard to clear away the dust of delusion and to reveal the shining face of Buddha which is beneath it." His teacher said to him, "Please don't ever forget. The dust is also the Buddha."

When it comes to the more mundane household duty of removing the dust from your own shelves, tabletops, furnishings, and possessions, even the word *dusting* becomes suspect. You are actually *de*-dusting or *un*-dusting. Unlike a baker who dusts the breadboard with flour, or a gardener who dusts an area with fertilizer, you are not gaily, spreading dust around the perimeters of your home. You're attempting to remove it. But what is really happening here? Is it actually possible to rid your home of Dust? How do you dust without raising more dust?

Dusting is an exercise in patience and dexterity. As soon as you begin to dust the things in your life, you are on your way toward learning a lesson in taking things for granted. Remember that dust is not vile, unimportant, or without worth. It is, among other things, a living environment for other beings. Whole universes are contained within just a small amount of this material. Zen students often bow to the dust of the world, in gratitude, just as they would bow to the great mountains, rivers, and forests of the world.

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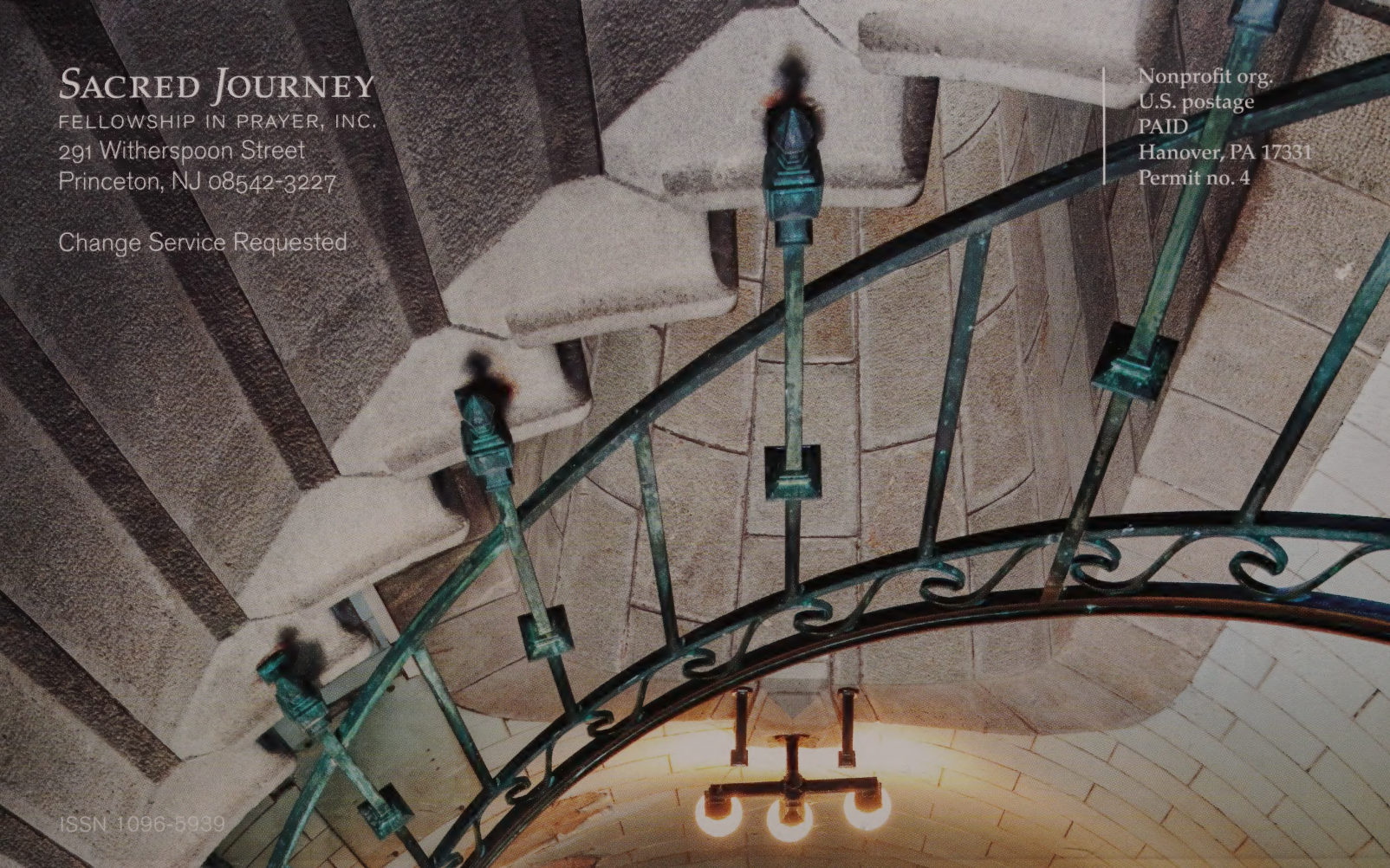

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